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A National Program Of Industrial Art Education

by CHARLES A. BENNETT

John Galsworthy has told us that the United States of America has the most favorable conditions of all the great nations for the development of art: we have the most money; we have the greatest market; we have the inherited talent of all the races of Europe.

This statement was doubtless intended to apply especially to the fine arts, but it seems just now to have a very special application to the industrial arts. But money and market and talent of themselves are not enough to insure American leadership in industrial art. To these there must be added education.

It was through education—not merely money and market and talent—that the nations of Europe became great in industrial art. It was the schools of design in France that enabled the French manufacturers to surprise the manufacturers of England and Germany with the superior artistic quality of their products at the Crystal Palace Exposition in London in 1851. It was the establishment of the South Kensington Museum and school that started the great movement for art education in England which bore fruit at the Paris Exposition in 1867, placing England in the first rank of artistic nations. It was the founding of many small museums in Germany and the adoption of a new and liberal policy in the establishment of schools of industrial art after the Franco-Prussian war, added to an aggressive commercial policy, that forced German art manufactures into the markets of the world in winning competition with those of the best of other nations.

And, by the same token, it will have to be through a forward-looking, well-organized, and efficient national system of industrial art education that the United States will become the leader of the great nations in industrial art, if she ever attains to such a position. The present is America's first great opportunity to become a great art-producing nation, but she cannot take advantage of this opportunity by sitting back and waiting for something to happen. The opportunity unrecognized or unutilized will soon cease to be an opportunity. Some other nation will recognize the opportunity, welcome it, and take advantage of it, and we will continue to sell raw materials at a low price and to buy them back at a great premium after they have been wrought into objects of use and beauty by school-trained workers after designs made by school-trained artists in the country that grasped this opportunity which was ours but of which we did not take advantage. Now, after the great war, is the psychological moment for America to take an important place in the arena of artistic production, even as she took a place of honor in fighting for democracy.

In order to make full use of this opportunity the United States must act as a nation. A few states or cities or communities might act independently with some results, but this would not be sufficient. What is needed is national action on a scale commensurate with the task and with the results that would come from such action.

Fortunately we have a precedent for such national action in the Federal Vocational Education Act. The principle of federal aid for education has been accepted. Present discussions on federal aid have to do with the field and the extent of such act, not with the principle involved. The way, then, is clear for carrying out a national program of industrial art education, provided its importance is realized.

If federal aid is to be given for this purpose it would seem to be obvious that there must be some central controlling body of educators, manufacturers, art workers, and economists, who see the problem as a national one, and have at their disposal certain appropriations of money. Such a central body might well be a division of a National Department of Education, or until such a department is established, it might be a division of the Bureau of Education, or of the Federal Board for Vocational Education. It should have close contact, also, with the Department of Commerce. This central body or board of industrial art education should reach out into all parts of the nation, and especially into all manufacturing centers, with its inspection force of experts, its advice, and its funds, so as to assist local schools in their efforts in the development of instruction in industrial art, but it should also spend a considerable proportion of its effort and, at first, quite a substantial sum of money, in the development of a national center of industrial art instruction. This center should consist of a combination of productive factories, school, and museum in order to help elevate the standard of artistic manufacture, and to train teachers who are to work in the various centers where local or state industrial art schools may be established. This center of instruction would be to the other schools and to the industries themselves what a graduate school now is to a college. It would be a place of research and of advanced instruction in special branches of art and art manufacture. It would give artists a higher type of special training than can be obtained at the present time. Like the typical higher schools of industrial art in Europe, it would give advanced training to the artist of demonstrated ability, but unlike these institutions, it would do this in a school that is also a productive factory. This one difference should be the chief distinguishing characteristic of the National School of Industrial Art in the United States, and this one is believed to be essential. The instruction must be given in connection with practical production, because without this contact the instruction is sure to become either too academic or too unmindful of the material limitations of good design; with this contact kept vital through actual experience in productive work that is up-to-date, the further the student is pushed in sound theory and pure emotional or artistic expression the better. The productive factory keeps the instruction within the range of the practical; it controls the student's technique to that extent, but it should not and need not restrict his imagination. On the contrary, experience has shown that practical contact with production helps in sound creative designing.

The factories of such a school might consist of one for each of the following groups of art industries: (1) furniture making and interior decorating, (2) textile manufacture, (3) pottery and tile making, (4) metal working, (5) printing and the manufacture of books. Each of these should be a real factory turning out a product by the best known methods with up-to-date machinery and by the best hand-skill methods. The things manufactured should be of very superior quality; no inferior thing should be allowed to bear the stamp of the school. The volume of output would be very small, because the primary purpose of the school should be instruction—not manufacture; the goods turned out would be the by-product of the school, but should always be kept up to the highest standard in design and manufacture. Prerequisites for admission to any given line of productive work would insure that only workers with considerable training or practical experience would be allowed to participate in the more important processes of the production work.

With such factories within its control, the school would train not only designers and teachers, but also foremen, superintendents, and expert workmen. The instruction therefore in this school would have to be given by the best experts that could be found anywhere. Only by employing such experts could the standard of factory production in the nation be elevated by the school.

To supplement the regular staff of the school it ought to be possible, especially in the dull season, if there be such, to obtain, through cooperation with manufacturers, a few selected men from the factories to render special service for brief periods. If the school is kept up to the highest standard this temporary loaning of experts would benefit the manufacturers as well as the school, because they would carry home ideas from the school as well as bring ideas to the school. To such a school a manufacturer might profitably send his designers or his foremen to get the latest and soundest ideas, and to come in contact with leaders in his craft. To such a school the young, ambitious worker would go on his own account in order to prepare for a job higher up. To such a school would go teachers in technical high schools, industrial schools, normal schools, and universities. They would gladly devote a few months, or a year, or even more, to intensive work in one special field of art industry in order to go back to their schools and give a higher type of instruction. There is today a very great need of just such a kind of teacher-training. There are now many places to get advanced instruction in pedagogy, but it is impossible to obtain in any school in this country the higher industrial art instruction that is needed and is being sought by progressive teachers. But the instruction must be practical or it will not meet the demand. It must give the student skill and power to apply art to industrial production, not merely to design in general, or to draw well, or to paint well, or to model well from the academic standpoint.

Making use of a productive factory as part of a school equipment is not a new idea, though it has not yet been widely applied, and in some cases in the past not wisely applied; but for certain phases of industrial training there is nothing to take its place. One of the oldest and best examples of a productive shop in a school —but in the field of machine construction—is the Washburn Shops of the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, Worcester, Massachusetts. During the past few years these shops have done a business of $125,000 a year. Professor William W. Bird, director of these shops, has given testimony to the effectiveness of the shops in giving greater value to the training of the engineers who go out from this school. As proof of this he referred to the fact that students go directly from the Institute to commercial positions without shock.

An outstanding example of the application of this principle to an art craft is the pottery connected with the H. Sophie Newcomb College of New Orleans, where a business of about $10,000 a year is carried on, and this has given rise to production in jewelry, bookbinding, embroidery, and other minor crafts amounting to several thousand dollars more. Professor Ellsworth Woodward, the director, stated some time ago that the enterprise had "passed through the experimental stage successfully, and established a reputation throughout the country." He believed the scheme to be capable of much further development.

It is not claimed that productive factories as part of school equipments should be entirely self-supporting, though under favorable conditions this has sometimes been true, as in the case of the Washburn Shops during favorable years; but it is conservatively claimed that the products of such factories may easily fetch more than the cost of materials used, thus bringing the cost of instruction down to the point where it is lower than instruction in science laboratory subjects.

It would seem to be evident, then, that aside from cost of buildings, equipment, and salaries of instructors, the factories in the proposed National School of Industrial Art would readily maintain themselves; yet this is comparatively unimportant, because the value of such a school to the nation would be in the large results in the superior knowledge, skill, and efficiency of the men and women it turned out, not in the money value of the small material output of its factories. The amount received from these products should be looked upon merely as salvage on material used for a higher purpose.

While the distinctive feature of a National School of Industrial Art should be its productive factories, it should be provided with a museum of industrial art products from all the industrial art centers of the world, and a very comprehensive working library of industrial art books, prints, original drawings, photographs, etc. Ample provision should be made for studios and lecture rooms, also classrooms convenient to all the shops and workrooms of the factories. Laboratories and private studios should be provided for special research and experimental work. In fact, the school should have all the facilities of a modern institution of higher learning in addition to its special feature—the factories.

The curricula of the school should be so organized as completely to *unify* theory and practice—not merely to *balance* them. In like manner the buildings should be so planned as to facilitate in the highest degree possible this unification, and it should be kept constantly in mind that the great aim of the school is the training of efficient, practical experts for the industries and for the schools in order that the art standard of the industries of the nation may be raised in harmony with the developing taste and ideals of the American people.

This may appear to be a large program compared with what we now have in the United States, but it is not over-large in comparison with what some European nations have done; and if it were once accomplished and the results were to become evident the wonder would be that it had not been done before. The great war has taught us that we can do things on a large scale if we will, and that we must if we are to maintain our place industrially among the nations. Fortunately, too, the war seems to have brought to us a new appreciation of the value of education—not only the general education of our elementary schools, our high schools, and colleges, but also of the special education that fits a man or a woman for adequate self-support, and provides the nation with experts on whom it can call in time of need. We have come to see as never before that a man educated for productive industry is a national asset and that the number of such men must be increased. While we are going forward in the training of men to maintain the mechanical side of industry, let us not forget to train men for the artistic side also. More and more it is becoming clear that the appearance of a product of manufacture is a large factor in its sale. Merchants realize that it is very often the attractive container that sells the goods. Little by little our schools are educating in taste, and each generation of consumers demands more artistic goods to purchase. If, from the standpoint of our manufacturers and of the nation as a whole, it is undesirable to see foreign-made goods preferred above American in our own markets, we must see to it that our industrial art education leads instead of follows that of foreign nations. Just now is America's opportunity in this field.

After all known science has been made available to every industry through our technical and vocational schools, after the best knowledge of economics and administrative science has been diffused through the schools and utilized in the industries, after the most efficient machines in the world have been installed in our industrial plants, after all these have been accomplished, we shall still lack the highest, the most vital element in industrial production if we omit art. It is essential, then, that to our system of mechanical training there be added effective practical training in industrial art, and the capstone of the entire system should be a great National School of Industrial Art.